



## Why learn when you do not have to?

### Introduction

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The present paper will aim to study the reasons why native speakers of English choose to learn a second language, when their mother tongue is considered the *de-facto* standard language of the world. The scholarly consensus has been for quite some time that English is the world's *lingua franca*, an assumption that is based on the sheer number of English speakers worldwide: Research data shows that English is spoken by 1.45 billion people around the world; and a staggering 1.07 billion use it as a second language (Ethnologue, 2023). This goes to show how predominant the language is for trade, education, politics, and more, since most speakers of the language use it as their second language.

This leaves the question, then, of why native English speakers seek to acquire a second language, when the data shows that they overwhelmingly do not have to. This signifies that there is more than just a transactional necessity for the language (i.e., language for the sake of communication), as, for example, 24 million people across the UK speak more than one language (Gration, 2021) – a country where 91% of the population speaks English as their main language, according to the latest Census data available (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

With this data as a starter point, then, this paper will analyse the case of a British citizen, whose personal experience learning Spanish will be analysed to try to understand the reasons why he sought out to learn the language. His experience will be analysed through the lens of several authors in the fields of bilingualism. By establishing a *case study* and interviewing him and analysing his answers, it might be possible to find the reasons why English native speakers want to learn a second language. While this analysis will be limited to just one case, the case study provides a useful framework to begin the research and it can also be applied to analyse other cases like Ruben's.

## Case Context

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Our subject of study was born in 2004, in the county of Kent<sup>1</sup> in the south of England, where he has spent all of his life so far with his family. His family's heritage can be traced to many places across Europe, but it is of special mention for the purposes of this paper, that none of his heritage can be traced back to Spain. Moreover, none of his family members but him speak the Spanish language.

Aged 18, he has just recently finished high school education and has gotten his Advanced Level Qualifications<sup>2</sup> – or A-Levels - in several subjects, including Spanish. His first contact with the Spanish language happened during his early childhood, when he used to listen to Spanish music. In his words, that music made him feel happy and made him think of the beautiful summer weather of Spain, a stark contrast with the colder, usually rainy weather of Kent. This would leave a long-lasting mark on him, who then would go-on to seek to acquire multiple languages – describing himself as a *language aficionado* -, including French, Russian, Arabic, and German, among others. He initially got an GCSE<sup>3</sup> in German and French – the step before an A-Level qualification – but he decided later on that he was interested in pursuing an A-Level in Spanish instead. One of his teachers made him do the different papers that are required for a GCSE qualification in Spanish – although he did not formally obtain such a qualification – and realised that he had the proficiency required to sit for the A-Level course.

His Spanish fluency, based on the results of his A-Level exam, would place him between C1 and C2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). He is able to handle conversations about virtually any topic in Spanish, just like a native speaker of the language would. I have had conversations with him in which I would speak in English, and he would answer back in Spanish without showing any particular effort in doing so, and other conversations have featured plenty of *code-switching* to both English and Spanish. While not an empirical measurement of his Spanish competency, he has met several of my friends and

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix 1 for a map of the area.

<sup>2</sup> A-Levels are a UK subject-based qualification for students aged sixteen and above. They are usually studied over two years, at the end of high school – or sixth form - leading to qualifications recognized for entrance to higher education institutes across the country.

<sup>3</sup> GCSE - short for General Certificate of Secondary Education - are qualifications obtained in the UK school system, awarded for different subjects. They are prerequisites to A-Levels and are valued by potential employers as well as the education community across the country. They usually comprise of 5 terms and are studied together with secondary school.

their reactions upon finding that he was from England were of amusement, as they had thought he was, in fact, a Spaniard.

The grammar accuracy that he possesses is less developed than native speakers of Spanish at the same level of language development. This is primarily explained by the way he first acquired the language, which was not through traditional learning methods. He used a method first popularised by Japanese learners called *All Japanese All The Time*<sup>4</sup>, which is not a learning approach based on grammar. He also aided his learning of the language through the consumption of music, movies, and other content in Spanish. Due to the context in which he lives, he has not had a lot of opportunities to put the language in use in real life. According to the information of UK's 2021 Census, the population of his village is 1779 people. Of that number, less than 0.57% of them speak Spanish, which means that, approximately, 10 people speak Spanish in the entire village, with him being one of them<sup>5</sup>. However, he has made plenty of acquaintances and friends through the internet, particularly through the use of video games<sup>6</sup> and the messaging platform *Discord*<sup>7</sup>, that he uses to connect with native speakers of Spanish as well as learners of Spanish in *servers*<sup>8</sup> that aim to connect Spanish speakers with each other, so they can put the language into use.

Outside of languages, he is really passionate about the arts, especially music. He plays many instruments, such as the saxophone, guitar, flute, and others. He is learning music theory – and is currently writing a thesis about the topic – and has composed several songs and other works of art. He enjoys learning about different music styles and genres, especially those from Latin America and Europe. He has also performed several gigs in places around Kent and other counties in the United Kingdom.

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix 2 for an overview of the methodology.

<sup>5</sup> I've had the pleasure of meeting and befriending two of those ten Spanish speakers.

<sup>6</sup> I have personally witnessed such attempts, with him befriending a group of people from Spain during a game of *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*.

<sup>7</sup> Discord is a messaging application very popular around the world. Its distinctive feature is the use of 'servers' to organise communities of people around one topic. It is also very popular with the gaming community.

<sup>8</sup> 'Servers' in Discord are self-contained communities. Think of an internet forum, that has different sections that discuss specific topics but that they all share an overarching theme. Servers, similarly, group people under one overarching theme but allows for the creating of separate spaces to discuss more specific topics.

## Theoretical Framework

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In order to analyse the subject's experience, it is imperative to establish a framework of analysis. A good starting point is the article by Panayiotou, which includes the study of 10 speakers of Greek and English and how their emotional reactions changed based on the language that was being used. Panayiotou's findings are particularly useful, as it allows me to establish certain basic parameters:

- a) There is an undeniable link between emotion and language, which Panayiotou establishes from multiple other sources: “[...]the viewpoint adopted in this study is that emotions are culturally and linguistically constructed (Armon-Jones, 1986; Averill, 1980; Parrott & Harre', 1996; Rosaldo, 1980; Wierzbicka, 1992, 1998, 1999; Winegar, 1995) and psychologically equivalent to statements (Harre' & Gillett, 1994: 146).” (Panayiotou, 2004)
- b) Emotions can depend on the language being used: “Without negating the bodily component of emotions, I argue that emotions are language dependent (Searle, 1995), as the raw or bodily experience of an emotion must be filtered through a cultural meaning-making system (Parrot & Harre', 1996), i.e., language, before it can be defined as an emotion. Language, then, is assumed to both actively construct and reconstruct emotions (Pavlenko, 2002a).” (Panayiotou, 2004)
- c) The notion that “one's emotional reaction shifts with language (and cultural context)[...]” And “that a change in codes (languages) implies, at least to a certain extent, a change in the cultural or social code used [...]” (Panayiotou, 2004), which lends support to the idea that language can be used as a tool to ‘escape’ the cultural context that comes with a mother tongue.

Another useful contribution comes from another article published in the same journal by Kinginger, in which she analysed the works of Canadian author Nancy Huston, trying to find links between her bilingualism and her emotions, based on previous research that supported the idea that learning a second language post-puberty or during adulthood “the two languages of an individual may differ in their emotional impact, with the first being the language in which

personal involvement is expressed, and the second being the language of distance and detachment” (Kinginger, 2004, p. 160), the article establishes an intriguing idea; learning additional languages may offer learners new and different senses of self and identity that are not available while using their native language..

Moreover, Colin Baker’s ideas on bilingualism are also of importance. In his book. Baker starts with the assumption that “since a bicycle has two wheels and binoculars are for two eyes, it would seem that bilingualism is simply about two languages” (Baker, 2001, p. 2). However, being bilingual, i.e., being able to communicate in two languages, is not as simple as that. It refers to the ability to use both languages in different contexts, purposes, and situations: “Bilingual individuals do not exist as separated islands. Rather, people who speak two or more languages usually exist in networks, communities and sometimes in regions.” (Baker, 2001, p. 43). In the same work, he also identifies 6 dimensions of bilingualism – Age, Ability, Balance, Development, Context, and Elective or Circumstantial bilingual – which can help classify different cases of bilingualism with a set of common criteria.

When discussing the sixth dimension of bilingualism, it is important to differentiate elective from circumstantial bilingualism, mentioned earlier. The first term refers to the people who choose to learn a language, they have made the decision to learn a second language without replacing their mother tongue. As such, elective bilingualism is a matter of choice. The latter term, circumstantial bilingualism, is applicable to those people who need a second language in order to persist and adapt to the society and culture they are living in. By making this choice, their mother tongue is endangered, as it is not used in its usual role and demands.

Just as valuable as Baker’s contributions are, so are the ideas of Krashen on Second Language Acquisition (SLA), specially his Creative Construction Theory, that explains that learners are exposed to input and as a result they form mental representations of the language and its structure and subsequently, these structures will be solidified in fluent speech, a phenomenon that usually happens in the classroom (although this is not his case, this notion of mental representations helps explain his learning journey), and his Input Hypothesis which aims to explain SLA more broadly. Krashen presents in this theory that a learner should be exposed to comprehensible input, i.e., an input that is appropriate for their current stage of linguistic competence.

When analysing bilingualism in any capacity, it is important to pay attention to the phenomenon of *translanguaging* and *code-switching*, which are best defined in the work by Lasagabaster and García which defines translanguaging “as multiple discursive practices that bilingual speakers use to understand the bilingual world in which they live. It is thus the process used by bilingual students to create a space where they make use of all their linguistic and semiotic repertoire [...]” (Lasagabaster & García, 2014, p. 2) and code-switching as the idea “that the bilingual speaker uses two languages as two separate monolingual codes” (Lasagabaster & García, 2014, p. 2).

## Analysis

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With this theoretical framework in place, I am able to analyse the specific case. For this, I have interviewed him on multiple occasions about his experiences learning languages – Spanish as well as others – and about his life in general. Also, since I have a personal relationship with him, I am able to draw from experiences I have shared with him, which has helped shape my overall analysis.

To begin with the analysis, it is abundantly clear to me that based on the working definition of bilingualism provided earlier, as well as further insights provided by Baker's work, that the subject is by all intents and purposes a bilingual; he has achieved almost complete native-like Spanish competence, since he is able to communicate about his feelings and emotions in Spanish with ease. Using Colin Baker's 6 dimensions of bilingualism, his case can be classified as:

- a) Age: Late bilingual, since he started his second language journey when he was a teenager.
- b) Ability: Productive bilingual. He is able to switch between English and Spanish with ease, and he constantly seeks opportunities to use Spanish with others just as much as he uses his mother tongue<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, the learning methodology that he used encourages immersing oneself in the language as well.
- c) Balance: His proficiency has not hindered his first language competence since he uses his second language in very specific situations and has not replaced his need for his first language.
- d) Development: His development is ascendant, as his second language is still developing – although he is greatly competent at it.
- e) Context: He has learned the language through both a formal context (his school) as well as informal context (mainly through the consumption of content) as mentioned earlier.
- f) Lastly, the subject is an elective bilingual, as he has sought out to learn Spanish not because he has a need to replace his first language, but rather as he wants to acquire multiple languages.

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<sup>9</sup> When he found out I was a native Spanish speaker he got quite excited, only to be disappointed when I asked him to please use English so I could practise my second language. We still have conversations in Spanish from time to time, as well.

This allows me to set the context of this particular case, which is needed for this type of analysis. In the introduction of this paper, it was established that my aim was to analyse the reasons why someone would learn a second language when they already speak the world's *lingua franca*. My initial assumption – one that has shaped my theoretical research – lies on the principle that language is a lot more than just a means to an end, and that there is a link between one's mental state and emotions and their ability, need and want to acquire a second language. Through my many different interviews and conversations with the subject, I was able to discuss the reasons why he sought out to acquire a second language, and in particular why Spanish.

First, he said did not have a 'real' need to learn Spanish. Nobody in his family nor circle of friends spoke the language and little people do in the village he lives in: "I'm not actually entirely sure why I started learning Spanish, but it's all just lots of kind of blurry ideas floating around, but that have all together created my reasons to learn it, but I don't have a specific reason and it's not like I woke up one day and said right, I'm going to learn Spanish. It was just more of a gradual thing."<sup>10</sup>

He felt an emotional connection to Spanish, that happened mainly through his interest in music, and he considers that was the first true motivator to learn the language: "I have always kind of liked Spanish music [...]. In particular I like a lot of flamenco, for example, which I've always been interested in. So, in parallel with learning Spanish, I've kind of started learning. I also had been, for quite a while, learning Spanish guitar techniques for flamenco and other styles from Spain, so that was probably the main first thing that got me interested in the language is the music because it was like a music that I'd never really heard before." He also described how the language made him feel happier: "I do remember just being young and it's cliché, but when I used to listen to this stuff as a child I just used to think of nice sunny days and people being happy and everything being laid back and easy."

As I had assumed based on my theoretical research, there was also an element of accessing a different side of his personality that was not present in his first language: "Speaking a different language helps you access a different sort of identity, if you will, and you can kind of become a different person when you're speaking." He mentions that sometimes he had trouble

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<sup>10</sup> This and the following quotes come from some of the interviews I had with the subject.



connecting with other people – he thinks as a result of his autism – and that learning Spanish has not only helped him connect with people in Spanish but has also allowed him to do so in English, since it gave him confidence: “Well, I learn languages so I can communicate with people. [...] It allows you to talk to more people and allows you to become more social and I think that's it. It's in that aspect that I was able to escape, that I'm sort of able to leave my slightly awkward side behind and be more confident and just not worry about it.”

He feels that speaking a second language lets him – using his words – escape his L1 personality and access a more confident version of himself in L2, as he feels like he is playing a character and therefore, he is not really him: “I've got this sort of protection of the language. [...] If anyone says anything to me, that's kind of offensive in a different language, it doesn't hurt nearly as much as it would in English, for example, because I'm kind of playing a character. [...] I have different personas.” Speaking about his Spanish *persona* – which he likes to call Alejandro – he thinks it is more outgoing and easier going than his English persona. In comparison, he feels like his Russian persona is more direct, and that his French persona is more flamboyant. This is supported by the research of Panayiotou (2004), which showed that people have different responses according to the language that they are using.

It is also interesting to analyse the fact that he feels like this concept of personas, which he thinks are born out of his curiosity and experiences with the different languages, are impacted by formal education. He expressed that learning Spanish formally in school has “killed a little bit of my excitement and curiosity about Spanish.” He thinks that this is due to the fact that he likes to learn languages to speak with people and learn new things and he feels like formal education is about grammar. He acknowledges that the monotony of school – the notion of having to learn words for homework or having to write an essay on a given topic that is not appealing to him – is what may discourage him a little bit. This concept is framed by Baker's dimensions, and it shows that there is a struggle in the context where he learns Spanish: School vs. the bubble of immersion that he has created following the methods of AJATT. It also reinforces the fact that he is an elective bilingual, as he continuously seeks to acquire the language through different means.

On a somewhat contrary view, he talks about learning languages – in general, not just Spanish – as something interesting. He considers himself to be fluent in English, Spanish and French, and he has, and is learning, other languages, like German, Arabic, Russian, Esperanto and

more. There was also a technical reason he is interested in learning languages: “I've always liked the code-like elements of language. I've always liked dissecting it and seeing it as a form of code. And I've talked to my computer friend about this because languages can be seen as code because every element, you know, you've got grammar, syntax, vocabulary, everything. It's all very structured like that, which I quite like.” He is also very knowledgeable on various language acquisition and ideas<sup>11</sup>, which he thinks have shaped his journey with languages, especially Krashen’s theory of Comprehensible Input, described earlier in the theoretical framework, which he said to have applied to learn Spanish.

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<sup>11</sup> We have discussed SLA and FLA theories and research a number of times, and I have shared plenty of materials that I acquired from the *profesorado* with him over time.

## Conclusions

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After interviewing the subject and learning more about his SLA journey, it has become very clear to me the many different reasons why people would seek out to acquire a second language when there is not a purely communicative reason for it. Most likely, this percentage of people will be minor compared to the number of people who learn a second language for a communicative end.

Some people will be interested in learning a language for just the sake of learning, as it can happen with just about any other topic. Some people are naturally curious and like to learn new things and concepts because they love to learn and love the learning process. These people may not necessarily learn a second language because they want to actively communicate in it, but rather for the experience of acquiring and learning something new. There will also be people who will want to acquire a second language because they want to access particular information or knowledge available in that particular language. This is demonstrated, for example, in this case, as the subject wanted to learn more about guitar playing techniques for Spanish music. Although in his case this was not the only reason, it was a motivator for his desire to learn the language<sup>12</sup>. For these people, using the acquired language will not be to communicate with other people, but rather to consume content in the acquired language.

In line with my theoretical research and initial assumptions, there are also some people who learn languages for the emotional aspects related to it. For some, this will mean learning a second language to access a different culture and may or may not involve an intent to ‘escape’ their native culture, such as the case of this subject, that has used Spanish as a means to access the Iberian culture, which he felt completely different to his own. For others, learning a second language acts as an ‘emotional shield’ that lets them put distance between their emotions and feelings in the first language and lets them create different emotions and feelings in the second language. These people may also put on different ‘personas’, as described earlier.

I feel like these different reasons may happen in isolation, or may combine and merge on a single person, like in the subject’s case. The theoretical framework was helpful for the analysis since it created the starting point that guided the discussion with him. It also allowed me to

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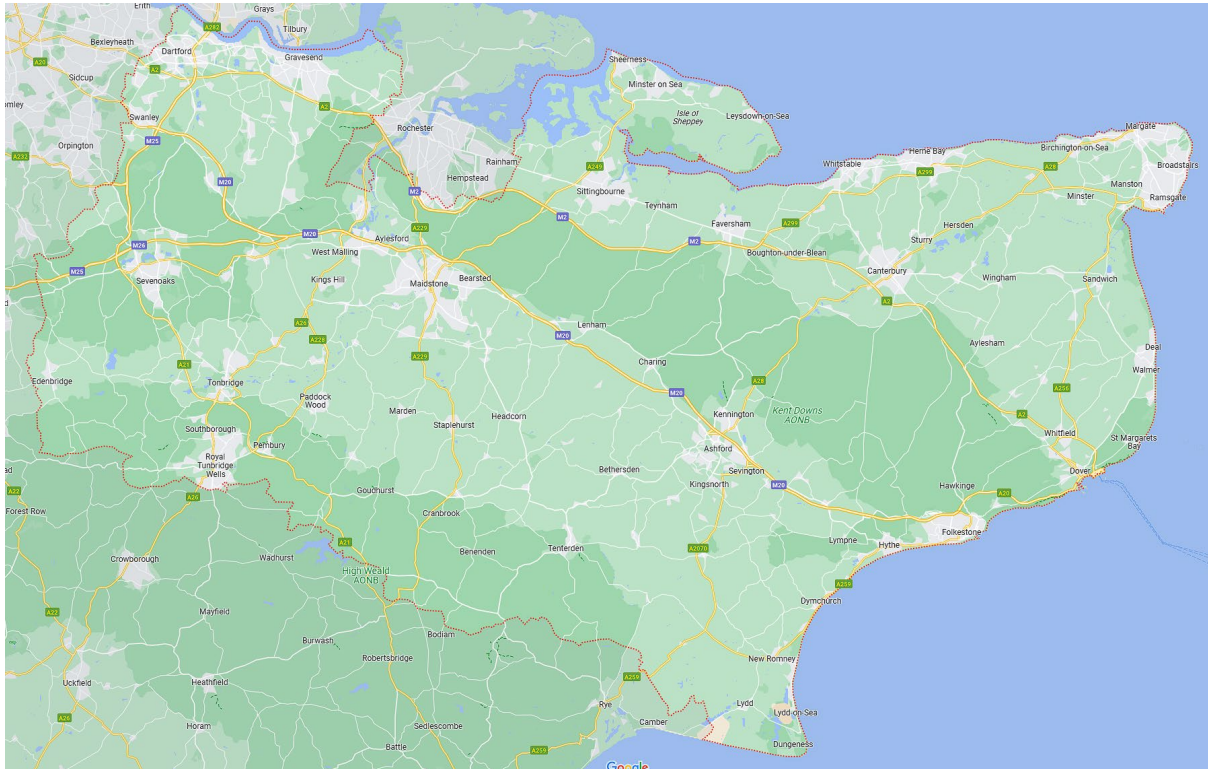
<sup>12</sup> Another case will be yours truly since I learned English to access information about technology and science.

process all the information collected during the interviews and analyse it in such a way that I am in a position to answer the title of this paper. People will learn languages for a variety of reasons, but why learn when you do not have to? The answer, I believe, is: Why not?

# Appendixes

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## Appendix 1



MAP OF KENT COUNTY AND SURROUNDING AREAS.

## Appendix 2

*All Japanese All The Time* (AJATT) is a language learning methodology developed by internet user Khatzumoto, who claims to have used it to learn Japanese to a conversational level in 18 months. The methodology is heavily inspired by Stephen Krashen's theories of Second Language Acquisition, as well as contributions made by another internet-developed methodology called *antimoon*, that aimed to help English learning and acquisition. AJATT has three central tenets that underlay the principles of the methodology:

- **Attitude towards the language:** AJATT encourages learners to feel like they are Japanese and to pretend that they are. This means that they should think of themselves as native speakers of the language, rather than foreign speakers of the language.
- **Immersion at home:** It is not necessary – although it is encouraged – to travel to Japan to achieve fluency in the language. People wishing to acquire it just need to spend any free time they have consuming content in Japanese, regardless of their capacity to understand it or not. Understanding will come with time, as they continue to be exposed to the language.
- **Spaced Repetition Software (SRS):** Spaced repetition involves using computer software that mimics the functionality of paper flashcards, with the difference being that the application intelligently times the use and spacing of the flashcards, based on the principle that humans are not good at handling big amounts of data at once. Reviewing the same information over a prolonged period of time leads to long-lasting acquisition of that information.

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